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ABSTRACT

Through an understanding of learning theories, both those that are cognitive in focus and those which rely on a stimulus-response paradigm, educators may come to a fuller knowledge of what is involved in languaging acts and to a more complete understanding of how to teach necessary communication skills. This paper provides a brief overview of learning theories and suggests that two specific theories, functionalism (as formulated by John Dewey) and observational learning (developed most recently by Bandura), have particular relevance for the teaching of basic language skills. For teachers, there should be no controversy between cognitive and stimulus-response hypotheses. Rather, teachers should concern themselves with understanding the methods which are most effective with each individual student. Generally, the cognitive recognition of structures and concepts should be assumed, students should be given models for imitation, and practice in the development of skills should be encouraged. (KS)

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Learning Theory and Languaging:
The Acts of Speaking, Reading, and Writing

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Wyoming Conference on Freshman and Sophomore English--Laramie, Wyoming, July 19-23, 1976

"If I didn't go to school for a long time and didn't learn a lot I wouldn't of be here now." If that sentence sounds familiar, it's only because we have all seen or heard it, or one very like it, many times. I would venture to guess that our responses have also been very similar. "Why can't he learn to write a good English sentence. Lord knows, I've tried my best to teach him." Have we really tried our best? Yes, I think we have, and yet the problems are still there.

The problems center around three basic pedagogical questions: (1) What should we teach regarding basic language skills? (2) Why should we teach basic language skills (in standard English)? and (3) How should we teach basic language skills? Most of us know the answer to the first question. If we don't, there is a plethora of grammar and rhetoric texts to help us out. But more and more of us seem to be asking for answers to the latter two, as this conference so clearly indicates. Why should we teach standard, basic English skills? and, "good Lord, how should we teach them?"

I think that Learning Theory, which for quite a long time has been the domain of psychologists and psychiatrists and more recently has fallen within the purview of psycholinguists, "Learning Theory" can help to provide us with some answers to these questions. In the remainder of this brief presentation, I will first look at Learning Theories in general. Then I will discuss the application of Learning Theory to the acts of languaging. Finally, I will try to show how some specific theories of learning may help to answer our questions of Why? and How?

Generally, Learning Theories fall into two major categories: (1) Stimulus-

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Response Theories, and (2) Cognitive Theories. The Stimulus-Response Theories include such divergent positions as Thorndike's "Connectionism," Pavlov's "Classical Conditioning," Guthrie's "Contiguous Conditioning," Skinner's "Operant Conditioning," and Hull's "Systematic Behavior Theory." Cognitive Theories include Tolman's "Sign Learning," and classical "Gestalt Theory." There are other theories which partake of one or the other or both of these categories, yet which can be classified as neither. These are the "Psychodynamics" of Freud, "Functionalism" and probablistic model theories.[1]

Although any learning theory generally attempts to answer certain questions [e.g., (1) What are the limits of learning? (2) What is the role of practice in learning? (3) How important are drives, incentives, punishments and rewards? (4) What is the place of understanding and insight? (5) Does learning one thing help you to learn another? (6) What happens when we remember or forget?], there are some issues of real controversy between the S-R and Cognitive theories of learning. The issues may be represented as follows:

S-R	Theory Preferences	Cognitive
1. Peripheral Intermediaries	{ intermediaries are integrators of behavior sequences }	Central Intermediaries
2. Acquisition of Habits		Acquisition of Cognitive Structures
3. Trial and Error	{ Problem solving }	Insight

There are other issues that are not confined to the major categories of learning theories; but these are the primary ones. I will return to them in a few minutes. Now, let's look briefly at learning theory as it applies to the languaging acts.

Of the three language acts (speaking, reading, and writing) speaking is the first we learn, and it is probably the one that is most significant, intellectually and emotionally, in the course of our lives. We learn phonetics, syntax, and semantics of speech largely unconsciously through observation and

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[1]Ernest R. Hilgard and Gordon H. Bower, Theories of Learning (New York: Appleton Century-Crofts, 1966), pp. 8ff. This and the following paragraph are excerpted from this text, a classical textbook on learning theories.

imitation, through trial and error of the speech patterns (phonetic, syntactic, and semantic), seldom those of standard English, which we hear and mimic. Although there is a certain innate, cognitive process at work, the environment plays a major role. A recent introductory text in Psycholinguistics concludes its chapter on "Language Acquisition" with the following:

> Simply put, children learn specific languages. . . . It's true that the innate capacity is there, but it must be stimulated by a child's particular linguistic environment, and the patterns that will emerge as his linguistic competence will be founded on the linguistic data fed to him in his surroundings. . . . The child thus grows up speaking a specific language in a specific language community.[2]

It is this initial language act, the way it is learned and so thoroughly ingrained, that has caused and will continue to cause teachers of English many problems, since these early language habits are so difficult to change.

Reading is the second languaging act learned, and this we learn largely by rote, habit formation, according to the cognitive structures of standard English syntax and semantics. Reading and our first stabs at writing are essentially learned by stimulus-response conditioning with all of its rewards and punishments. It is learned, nevertheless, in a manner similar to that by which we learned to speak, and the conflict generated between the previously learned and the new structures is not, perhaps, easily observable.

The last of the languaging acts to be learned, writing, is perhaps the most difficult. This may be for several reasons. First, we are asked to learn to write by understanding and assimilating cognitive structures that are often very foreign to those we have so engrained in learning to speak. Second, we are asked to learn these structures in a different way. We are asked to learn them by cognitive understanding and not by conditioned response mode that was utilized in learning our other languaging acts. Thus, there is an interference, a conlict which is very difficult to overcome; and for many of our students, it is close to impossible. This interference with the learning process is what Piaget has called "cognitive dissonance."

I think that I can now come to some conclusions about the two questions set forth at the outset of this discussion: (1) Why teach basic language skills (standard English)? and (2) How may we teach these basic language skills?

Why? How many of you ask yourself this question? Or maybe you ask, Why should I try to teach them when they don't really want to learn? There are

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[2]Joseph F. Kess, Psycholinguistics: Introductory Perspectives (New York: Academic Press, 1976), p. 80.

those of us who are saying that we should no longer try to teach or learn "standard English," if we don't speak it to begin with. And how many of us speak standard English? I think that we are the victims of a peculiar kind of illogic. In our frustration, we ask the irrelevant question, "Is it possible to teach these people to write standard English?" And the answer we give ourselves is negative, by which we then conclude that to try to do so is unnecessary and of no real use. The easier answer becomes, "give them what they want."

Learning theory gives us two good answers for the question, Why? First, we should teach the structures of standard English (written and oral) because it will help the individuals we teach by aiding the development and growth of their cognitive ordering capacities. Second, since we speak and write within specific language environments and since standard English is the predominantly accepted form in our society, the individuals whom we teach **need** it for survival. With regard to the first reason, the development of cognitive ordering capacities, this is what I.A. Richards meant when he said, in Speculative Instruments, that language "is an organ -- the supreme organ of the mind's self-ordering growth. . . . language is an instrument for controlling our becoming." (p. 9) In the second instance, survival, the reason is self-evident. If we simply return to our early language environments, standard English and language skills may not be absolutely necessary, but our chances for survival will be greater for having learned them. And if we don't return to our early language environment, as most of us don't, these skills will be absolutely necessary. Professor James Sledd, at this conference last summer, gave a talk entitled, I believe, "English for Survival." Understanding learning theory, the stages of language development, and the social influences on linguistic formation will enable us to achieve a clearer understanding of why we should teach standard English language skills.

Finally, two particular theories of learning may give us a new perspective on the last of our questions, "How should we teach these basic language skills?" These two theories are: (1) Functionalism, as formulated by John Dewey and expanded or altered by Angell, Carr, Woodworth, and others; and (2) Observational Learning, an old theory rediscovered and developed most recently by Bandura ("Social Learning Through Motivation," 1962; "Vicarious Processes: A Case of No-Trial Learning," 1965). Specifically, these theories will provide for us some ways of dealing with one of our most serious problems, motivation, without which the learning process is an agony at best.

Functionalism, begun by Dewey as early as 1896, is a more eclectic theory

of learning than those of either of the two major categories mentioned earlier. It is concerned mainly with what works, rather than with dogmatic positions. Although it is unnecessary to give a thorough explanation of Functionalism, a few points will be meaningful. Melton, in 1950 ["Learning," in W.S. Monroe, Encyclopedia of Educational Research (New York: MacMillan), pp. 668-690] gave a representative Functionalist statement, with his analysis of the learning process and the major experiemental problems of learning. He states, ". . . the learning process is primarily a matter of the discovery of the adequate response to a problem situation and the fixation of the satisfying situation-response relationship." (Melton, p. 270) The major problems of learning, according to Melton are these:

1. Motivation
2. Initial discovery of the adequate response
3. Fixation and elimination
4. Factors determining the rate of learning
5. Transfer of training and retention

Although these are all important, the first two are our chief concern. Motivation, as explained by Woodworth (Dynamic Psychology, 1918), involves preparatory and consummatory reactions. Consummatory reactions are those of direct value to the organism and satisfy drives or needs, while preparatory reactions are only of indirect value to an organism, its value consisting of the fact that it leads to or makes possible consummatory reactions. By extrapolation then, it seems that in motivating our students to learn basic language skills, it is necessary that they be given to understand the need to learn them, thus to establish a consummatory reaction. The motivating conditions, according to Melton, have three functions: (1) to activate the organism, (2) to direct variable and persistent activity, and (3) to select or emphasize fixated or eliminated activities.

This motivation, however, will be of little use without the second element, the initial discovery of the adequate response. The functionalist will accept either trial-and-error or insight as the means to this discovery. On the other hand, Melton mentions two other forms of initial discovery, which, although less systematic, should not be neglected. These are guidance and imitation, both of which may be parts of the same form, since both aid the learner to observe the problem solution of another. In this respect, "Observational Learning," the second theory mentioned above, has some significance. This new/old theory is based on imitative learning utilizing models to establish adequate response behavior. Motivation is, in part, supplied by instructions before and after observation.

What does all of this mean? If we may return for a minute to the issues of controversy between the Stimulus-Response and Cognitive theories of learning, it means that for us as teachers there should be no controversy. Whether we emphasize the use of peripheral or central intermediaries, whether we emphasize the acquisition of habits or cognitive structures, whether we rely on trial and error or insight, is of little consequence. Students will vary. Some methods will work with some, some with others. Our major function should be to understand the methods and to discover which will work best with which student. Trust the cognitive recognition of structures and concepts--explain, discuss, teach the nature, function, and uses of language. Give your students models for imitation--the writings of others, your writings, those of other students (including tutors or learning counselors). But don't neglect to emphasize the need for practice in the development of skills, for the acquisition of these skills requires changes in old habits and the formation of new ones. Have them write as much as possible.

Through an understanding of learning theory -- of which I have been able to only give you a glimpse -- we may come to a fuller appreciation of what is involved in our languaging acts and thus to a more complete knowledge of how we may teach and learn the necessary skills. Speaking, reading, and writing may then renew their tarnished images and become once again recognized as essential, organic activities of human existence.